

Twenty-three years ago, the second National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights marked a profoundly historic period in the ongoing struggle for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) equality. Half a million people, GLBT and straight, marched on our nation's capital to be seen and heard. This national "coming out" followed the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, a time when homosexuality was stigmatized as a cause of the disease. The six-day demonstration bore witness to the unveiling of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt and gave birth to numerous GLBT rights organizations.

At a meeting of more than 100 GLBT activists from around the country in Manassas, Virginia, the momentum of the National March inspired Rob Eichberg, a founder of The Experience, and Jean O'Leary, then head of National Gay Rights Advocates, to create a national day to celebrate coming out. Every October 11, we celebrate each other, remember those we have lost, and hold workshops, speak-outs, rallies, and other kinds of events to raise GLBT awareness and move our nation forward.

This National Coming Out Day is particularly tragic, reminding us of the true costs of hate and bringing to light a disturbing national trend afflicting our young people: bullying. Within a period of three weeks, five teenagers were driven to take their own lives by bullies who tormented them because of their sexual orientation:

On September 29, Raymond Chase, 19, a gay sophomore studying culinary arts at Johnson & Wales in Rhode Island, hanged himself in his dorm room.

On September 23, Asher Brown, 13, of Houston, Texas shot himself in the head because of incessant bullying from peers who perceived him to be gay.

On September 22, Tyler Clementi, 18, a freshman student and accomplished violinist at Rutgers University, jumped off the George Washington Bridge after his roommate, Dharun Ravi, and fellow hallmate, Molly Wei, streamed a video of him being intimate with a man in his dorm room on the internet.

On September 19, Seth Walsh, 13, of California was found unconscious and not breathing after

attempting to hang himself because of relentless teasing by bullies. He died in the hospital ten days later.

On September 9, Billy Lucas, a 15-year-old from Indiana, hung himself after years of bullying and torment by classmates because he was different.

And, on July 9, Justin Aaberg, a 15-year-old from Minnesota who came out when he was 13, hanged himself in his room after being bullied in school and recently breaking up with his boyfriend.

These tragedies make it clear that our schools, colleges, and universities are inadequately equipped to address bullying and support GLBT students. According to Safe Schools South Florida, 70 percent of GLBT students report verbal, sexual or physical harassment in their schools. Furthermore, almost 40 percent of GLBT youth report that no one ever intervened when homophobic remarks were heard. Sadly, GLBT students are also three times more likely to attempt suicide.

According to Sue Rankin, associate professor of college student affairs in Penn State's College of Education, only 7 percent of our campuses have any resources institutionalized to serve GLBT populations. Moreover, only 13 percent have non-discrimination clauses that are inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity.

We must ensure that students, parents, and teachers have adequate support and protection from bullying in all its forms, including through new social media and technology. I stand committed to supporting measures in Congress, such as the *Student Non-Discrimination Act* and the

Safe Schools Improvement Act

, as well as efforts like The Trevor Project and Make It Better Project, which help foster a safe learning environment for all students and provide them with a support network. As we reflect on National Coming Out Day this year, it is my sincere hope that this nation will act swiftly and meaningfully to address bullying before it is too late for one more young person.

Safe Schools South Florida is the only organization in South Florida comprised of professional educators committed to training education professionals to recognize and intervene in

harassment and bullying of GLBT students and the children of GLBT parents. For more information, please visit: www.safeschoolssouthflorida.org.

The Trevor Project is a nonprofit endeavor established to promote acceptance of GLBT youth. The Trevor Project advocates acceptance and helps prevent teen suicide by promoting mental health and positive self-esteem through a premiere online destination, nationwide 24/7 call centers, and empowering social activities. For more information, please visit: www.thetrevorproject.org.

The Make It Better Project gives youth the tools they need to make their schools better now. Through its Web site and YouTube channel, youth and adults can work together to make schools safer for GLBT youth. For more information, please visit: www.makeitbetterproject.org.

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